

SOUTH



AUSTRALIA

FINDING OF INQUEST

An Inquest taken on behalf of our Sovereign Lady the Queen at Adelaide in the State of South Australia, on the 10th and 14th days of April, 2000, before Wayne Cromwell Chivell, a Coroner for the said State, concerning the disappearance of Robert Hutchinson.

I, the said Coroner, do find that Robert Hutchinson, late of 13 Fuchsia Way, Nerang, Queensland, aged 60 years, died between 18th and 22nd day of April, 1999 at a place on the coast of the Great Australian Bight 119 kilometres East of the South Australian/Western Australian border. The cause of death is undetermined. The circumstances of death were as follows:-

1. This inquest concerns the disappearance of Robert Hutchinson.
2. Mr. Hutchinson was last seen by his defacto wife, Ms. A.M. Ross, on Sunday 18 April 1999. Ms. Ross said that at about 10.00a.m. that day he received a telephone call from her nephew, Mr. Henry Hutchinson, after which he told her:-

“I am dead, that’s my life over”. (Exhibit C.1a, p1).

Mr. Hutchinson had told Ms. Ross that his nephew and niece had accused him of sexually abusing them thirty years earlier. He did not admit the truth of these allegations to her, although he did not deny the truth of them either (p.3). Ms. Ross said that the following conversation also occurred with Mr. Hutchinson on that day:-

“I recall that he said to me ‘You remember those cliffs around South Head (Sydney)? Well they’re all around Australia. There will be no body’.

I said to him, ‘What are you going to do about work?’ and I recall he said, ‘I’m going away to die and you want me to do the right thing’ I felt that if he wrote his resignation out and actually saw it he would have second thoughts about what he was doing and the finality of it all.

He went inside and I followed him around, he went to the dining room table and he sat down and wrote out his resignation to the hospital, he also wrote out a note to Lifeline authorising them to collect his belongings. He then went into the bedroom where I saw him pack some belongings into a suitcase. I also saw him place a couple of his cameras into a plastic bag. I recall he said to me, 'Do I act as a tourist? This is spooky'. I recall that he was wearing dark blue denim jeans, a grey pattern shirt and white sneakers.

I recall that Robert asked me to walk around the gardens with him one last time, and as we did he picked some lavender that he was going to put in his car. We then walked around to the front of the house, he kissed me and we were both crying. I recall he said to me, 'Don't make this any harder'. He then got into his car and drove away". (Exhibit C1a, p2)

3. Ms. Ross reported Mr. Hutchinson missing at Broadbeach Police Station on Monday 19 April 1999.
4. Mr. Henry Hutchinson has deposed to the truth of the allegations (Exhibit C.2a), and so has his sister (Exhibit C.3a). In a transcript of a telephone conversation on 9 April 1999 with Mr. Henry Hutchinson, Mr. Robert Hutchinson virtually admitted his behaviour (Exhibit C.2b), and implied that he would commit suicide (p.8-10). In the telephone conversation I have mentioned, on 18 April 1999, he repeated these statements (Exhibit C.2c).
5. On 22 April 1999, Mr. L.W. Thiel found a camera, other equipment and a wallet containing cash, credit cards and other papers at a point about 30 metres from the edge of a cliff on the Great Australian Bight, situated approximately 119 kilometres East of the South Australian/Western Australian border. He also found an empty bottle of expensive cognac in the same area. Mr. Thiel took the wallets and papers etc. to the Eucla Police Station, and left the cognac bottle in position as a marker (Exhibit C.4a).
6. Sergeant R.J. Taylor of the Eucla Police Station caused further inquiries to be made and established that Mr. Hutchinson had been missing since 18 April 1999. He passed these details to the Penong Police in South Australia (Exhibit C.5a, p2).
7. On 23 April 1999 police from South Australia and Western Australia met in the general area indicated by Mr. Thiel. The location was not found initially, but at about 3.45p.m. the cognac bottle was located by Senior Constable Close. Senior Constable Close and Sergeant Wilson from the Penong Police Station searched the area and also located a road map, video case and two pairs of eye-glasses. Sergeant Wilson stated that near where these articles were located, the cliff drops away at about 45 degrees for about 40 metres, before it becomes a vertical drop. About thirty metres down the sloping part of the cliff, they located parts of a red plastic bumper bar, which was later identified as coming from a Mazda 323 (see the statement of Detective Wotton,

Exhibit C.8a). They also saw marks on the ground consistent with impact from a vehicle, and directly below this area Sergeant Wilson described an oil slick in the water and “bubbles of oil breaking on the surface” (Exhibit C.10a, p2).

8. On 24 April 1999 police and State Emergency Service officers attended the area and two divers abseiled seventy metres down the cliff. One diver swam out and was able to see a dashboard and steering wheel wedged between rocks, but due to unsuitable weather conditions (which caused the other diver to receive slight injuries), further action was aborted. The police concluded that it was unlikely that they would find the body as it appeared that the vehicle had broken up on impact (Exhibit C.10a, p3).
9. Photographs from Mr. Hutchinson’s camera were developed and numbers 31 to 36 had been taken in the area at the top of the cliff and one depicted his Mazda 323 parked at the spot where the cognac bottle was located (Exhibit C.10a, p4).
10. Further inquiries have failed to find any further trace of Mr. Hutchinson.
11. Taking all circumstances into account, I am satisfied on the balance of probabilities, particularly having regard to his conduct in Queensland before leaving, and the finding of alcohol, money and valuable personal possessions at the scene, that Mr. Hutchinson’s disappearance has not been staged, and that he has taken his own life.
12. Finding
I am satisfied that between 18 and 22 April 1999 Robert Hutchinson took his own life by driving his Mazda 323 over a cliff and into the Southern Ocean at a point 119 kilometres East of the Western Australian/South Australian border. The precise cause of death cannot be established, and will be recorded as “undetermined”.

Key Words: disappearance; suicide

In witness whereof the said Coroner has hereunto set and subscribed his hand and

Seal the 14th day of April, 2000.